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ABSTRACT

The word "volunteer" has a different meaning in various cultures. The ways that people from a variety of cultures perceived volunteerism offered insights into the ways that people from those cultures organized their nations and communities. In this paper, part of a series on volunteerism, the National Director of American Field Service Europe (AFSE Intercultura), a volunteer organization located in Madrid, Spain, described some ideas about the meaning of volunteerism. Among the insights identified was that an organization must be prepared to respond to the needs and goals expressed by its volunteers. (DB)

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Volunteer Development Discussion Paper

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No. 2

THE MEANING OF VOLUNTEERISM

by Miguel Ángel Martín

July 1988

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The AFS Center for the Study of Intercultural Learning

Introduction

In this Discussion Paper, Miguel Angel Martin describes some of his ideas about the meaning of volunteerism. As he notes, the word "volunteer" carries different meanings or images in different cultures. This theme will be elaborated in the next paper of this series, a report of the roundtable discussion that took place in November, 1987 with the researchers for the Volunteer Resources Study. The nine researchers assembled described the word or words used in their countries to refer to volunteers and the work that they do. The language of volunteerism and the images that different words convey give us interesting insight into different cultures and ways that people in those cultures organize their nations and communities.

One clear outcome from the research so far is that the images frequently attached to the word "volunteer" do not relate to the work of the people who support AFS. For example, a youth organization in Spain recently published an article about the Volunteer Resources Study. To illustrate the article they used a picture of a uniformed Red Cross nurse among wounded soldiers. AFS volunteers may have a difficult time relating their volunteering to that of the Red Cross nurse, which may explain why we have found so many AFS volunteers who don't identify themselves as volunteers.

While this may seem to be merely a matter of vocabulary, questions of language deserve serious consideration. The images associated with the languages we speak are powerful and should not be ignored. If many of our volunteers do not call themselves by that name, what might that tell us? Understanding how volunteers see themselves is necessary if we want to understand their motivations and their commitment. But as Miguel Angel Martin points out, an organization must also be prepared to respond to the needs and goals expressed by the volunteers.

The AFS Volunteer Resources Study is not the only way in which AFS is working to improve its ability to listen and respond to its volunteers. In April of this year, the European Federation for Intercultural Learning (EFIL) sponsored a Seminar on Volunteer Motivation and Recruitment that took place in Kartause Ittingen, Switzerland. The objectives of this seminar were to share information and theory about how organizations such as EFIL are able (or not able) to motivate volunteers; to identify groups of people who should be asked to volunteer for AFS/EFIL; and to develop specific plans to recruit and motivate volunteers. Many AFS countries have scheduled a follow-up program of workshops or seminars; for example, AFSE Intercultura is planning a seminar in October to focus on volunteer motivation and the findings of the Volunteer Resources Study. Such efforts are important in maintaining our volunteer strength and, hence, the viability of AFS Programs.

About the Author: Miguel Angel Martin

Miguel Angel Martin presently is the National Director of AFSE Intercultura, AFS's office in Spain. He began his staff affiliation with AFSE Intercultura as Coordinator of Volunteer Development. Understanding the culture of this country where volunteerism is not highly valued, Miguel worked to establish a Spanish volunteer organization that proved to be appropriate to the political and social structures of the Spanish people.

AFSE Intercultura participated in the first phase of the EFIL Organisational Development Programme; as a participant on the "OD team," Miguel developed the analysis and strategies that have resulted in the establishment of the Spanish national volunteer association's structure. The development of appropriate communication channels, the recognition of the need to provide for the on-going development of "middle tier" volunteers, and the decentralisation of the regional associations have been the key to AFS's thinking about volunteer development in Spain.

A bridge-builder, Miguel also identified the opportunity to position AFSE Intercultura in the voluntary youth sector in Spain at a time when the country was re-emerging as a democratic political system and entering the European Community.

Miguel Angel Martin holds a bachelor's degree in biology; undoubtedly this background in molecular structures has served him well in thinking about organisational structures for volunteer development. His wonderfully powerful communication with guitar in hand is not to be missed.

Karen Hapgood
Human Resources Development Manager
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THE MEANING OF VOLUNTEERISM

Miguel Angel Martin
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Are there any universal concepts?

Is it possible to find a word that, translated into any language, means exactly the same in all of them? I think not. Even those words that imply great concepts -- justice, peace, freedom — may have different meanings depending on the context and the cultural and political background in which they are used. And many international clashes that seem impossible to resolve are caused precisely by those different meanings.

Problems may also arise when it comes to more specific and concrete concepts. In East Harlem, New York City, a boy wearing a T-shirt imprinted with the word "ispano" is undoubtedly affirming in an active way his cultural identity in front of the larger and more powerful group. In Spain, a T-shirt displaying this same word is nothing but the result of a publicity campaign of a leading national bank. A young man who wears it is not affirming anything, except maybe that he likes the design, or that he has a relative who works in any of the hundreds of branches existing all around the country.

It would be logical, then, to assume that the word "volunteer" may have a variety of meanings in different languages, not to mention a variety of values for the people of different cultures. An international/intercultural organization that operates on the basis of voluntary work should be the first to recognize the truth of this argument.

The word "volunteer" (and its cognates in other languages) is derived from the Latin: "voluntas" (desire, consent, intention) and "voluntatis" (spontaneously, freely, willingly). However, when you talk about a volunteer organization, you can be sending a different message depending on your perspective. The words "volunteer organization" can conjure up images as varied as a Red Cross boy's group, an association of long-bearded revolutionaries, or even a group of widows belonging to the Salvation Army. The meaning of the word "volunteer" can be social, political, humanitarian, medical, religious, etc. The adjective that accompanies the word "volunteer" is decisive in and may even determine the development and image of a voluntary association. So an association of political volunteers carries a different image than does an association of medical volunteers.

Generally speaking, I dare say that the adjective used with "volunteer" various enormously from Anglo-Saxon to Latin cultures. I obviously have to limit myself to Western culture because it is my own culture. I wouldn't presume to extend my comments to other cultures even though I know there is even wider diversity than that which I am addressing.

In the Latin world, the word "volunteer" (which, by the way, is very recently recognized in Spain and is only beginning to be currently used) has a tradition of either political, religious, or charitable implications. In this last case, "volunteering" is mainly related to helping the handicapped, the injured, or simply those who are poor. This action is usually charged with a deep sense of charity, the most representative religious feeling in Catholicism. In the Anglo-Saxon world, the word "volunteer" tends to refer to a social action that can be developed in various ways and that does not necessarily go together with political ideologies or religious feelings.

Let's ask ourselves an essential question: Why does volunteer work exist? The obvious answer for many people is "because someone has to do it." But this leads to deeper questions about the nature, the role, and very idea of the State. Depending on the dominant concept of the State, that "someone" can vary widely. For instance, a Spanish citizen would think that this "someone" should be the government due to the paternalistic conception that the average Spaniard has of the State. It is the State's role to protect him, guarantee his security, provide for his welfare, and provide essential public services. Voluntary action in these circumstances mostly means political involvement that focuses on building a government that meets these goals. Its work and obligations are more political in nature.

From an American point of view, however, this concept of the State may have shades of socialist philosophy. In a more individualistic conception of society, where the State does not have this prevailing role, the citizens must necessarily get organized to solve their immediate problems by themselves. Their actions will then be less theoretical or political and more social and practical. Volunteer organizations that deal with practical problems are more likely to be accepted under these circumstances, and their significance and social role will be better understood.

Of course cultural and social backgrounds are the result of endless dynamic factors that favor change. Spain may be a good example of that. In the years of dictatorship, volunteerism for all practical purposes was reduced to political militancy. As I said before, any other voluntary activity consisted of Red Cross medical assistance or the charity work of local religious communities. Following the achievement of democracy came a period of disillusionment and lowered motivation and, therefore, lowered political commitment. Nevertheless, the opportunities for association led, step by step, to the creation of groups (mostly youth groups) that voluntarily undertake social service. The State itself seems to realize the importance of

non-profit private organizations that operate on a volunteer basis, doing important work that the State either cannot do or does too late.

The volunteer sector, then, acts as a supplement, or at least a complement, to State-provided services. The government in these circumstances encourages the development of such organizations and favors their existence by giving them the resources they need to do their work. An example of this can be found in the existing pattern of some European countries such as the U.K. or the Netherlands. The volunteer sector is reaching a high level in Spain in such diverse tasks as civil defense, road construction, and even the preparation for the Olympic Games in 1992. In the same way, volunteer resources in areas of strictly social work (with outcasts, minorities, etc.) are developing successfully. Intercultural program volunteers are subject to these same trends and policies.

It would now be interesting to approach the subject from another point of view. Culture must never be regarded as something static determined chiefly by geography, or more correctly, by the difficulty created by geographical barriers. We have more and more examples of "generational cultures" that do not respect borders and to which persons from various countries belong. We can speak about the pre-war or post-war generations, the '68 generation, or the hippie movement.

In the same way that the social and political environment can influence the extent to which a volunteer organization may develop, one could say that the idea of "volunteerism" also has different meanings for different generations. We again face a basic point that a particular term or concept that is embodied in the spirit of one cultural generation will inevitably die with the passing of its generation. The social solutions that are exclusively framed in a specific and temporary philosophy will not outlast the culture that created them. What was good for earlier times is not necessarily valid for today.

I think it would be advisable to reflect on these ideas when it comes to analyzing the present situation of our "volunteer resources." Whenever one speaks about the problems of volunteer resources the magic word springs: motivation. But to motivate means most of all to understand properly the spirit that makes a volunteer act at any given time and not to forget that the same goals may imply different attitudes and working ways.

The evolution of AFS throughout its history is due to a great extent (though not always) to the pressures that have arisen from its volunteer base. The process of internationalization first, and diversification of programs second (now including other social groups besides students) seem to be a clear response to the needs and demands of a significant portion of our volunteers. In Spain and elsewhere, some of the newly developed AFS program components provide an important social-action content for volunteers who had not been previously attracted to existing programs.

The process of decentralization itself, now being discussed, and even the changing of the name to AFS Intercultural Programs seems to provide further evidence of how the international organization must take into account the condition, will, and situation of its volunteers, who work hardest for ideals in which they believe.